

A Case Study of Differentiated Instruction in the EFL Reading Classroom in one high school in Morocco

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Abstract— The current study examines the effects of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on the reading skills in the EFL classroom (2nd Baccalaureate, Arts-stream) in one High School in Morocco. One EFL class is taught reading comprehension lesson in the traditional one-size-fits-all instruction and later in the differentiated mode. The teacher observed for this study modified the reading instruction based on students' interests. The study investigates flexible grouping as a DI reading strategy used to differentiate reading instruction. Students were surveyed after the implementation of DI methodology to measure the impact of differentiated instruction on their involvement in the reading skill. A grounded theory format is used to investigate the data collected, mainly the researcher's observation and interviews Patton (2002). A case study methodology is very informative in identifying students' needs in reading. It also provides the teacher with insights while planning for effective ways to cater for student's needs. A qualitative survey of students' attitudes is also examined to delve much deeper into the human dimensions of DI's impact on the learners.

Keywords— Differentiated Instruction, EFL Class, Reading Comprehension, Flexible Grouping.

I. INTRODUCTION

EFL instructors' responsibility in today's classroom is to help all their students reach an optimal academic performance. In Morocco, there is a wide national movement of reform that seeks individuation of student performance levels. (The Supreme Council of Education, 2015) Hence, schools are striving to meet the requirements of a new educational vision of doing school, on the one hand, and the pressing demands of the third millennium in education, on the other hand. EFL teachers need also to implement new methods and approaches to be in tandem with the current trend in education. Teaching the four language skills mandate a broad understanding of students' needs and interests. EFL Classrooms are now becoming more heterogeneous and student variance has become an undeniable fact. To fix this dilemma, EFL teachers need to change their traditional instructional habits and practices, which have deleterious effect on students' academic performance, by using differentiated methods and strategies to cater for this diverse student's population. Anderson (2007) stated that teachers who understand differentiated instruction use a medley of strategies to cater for students' differences in needs and abilities. Wenglinsky (2002) claimed that academic success is contingent upon instructional approaches and practices. EFL teachers can contribute so much to students' success in the reading area.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Reading has always been considered a perennial challenge for both teachers and students alike. The problem of teaching and learning reading in the Moroccan EFL classroom emanates from the fact that reading is often taught as a subservient skill not as a self contained skill. (MEN, 2007). Besides, EFL teachers often lack the professional training needed to cater for a variety of student differences in their classrooms. So, EFL teachers undervalue its detriment to learning the other skills. Its impact goes unnoticed. However, reading forms strong relationships with other skills like writing. Development in reading and writing as self-contained skills requires exposing learners to a variety of highly challenging reading texts and writing tasks.

The teaching methods adopted by most EFL teachers in the classroom fail to accommodate students' differences in terms of ability levels and learners' profiles. Traditional ways of teaching reading or *the-one-size-fits-all* approach to teaching this skill fail to see students' differences and teach them as if they are a carbon copy of each other. Baccalaureate students (especially Art-majors) lack efficiency in performing the reading tasks. Most of them complain from the lack of understanding of texts embedded in the textbooks they use.

In this study I examined different ways of catering for students differences while teaching them reading. The

problem is ascribable to teachers' ignorance of DI and their unwillingness to individuate their teaching practices. DI is the answer to fixing the problem of students' diversity. It is a great asset to catering for a large body of student population. DI provides different modalities for teaching and learning reading.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper set out to answer the following research questions

1. Does differentiating the way teachers teach reading make any difference in students learning that skill?
2. What are students' attitudes after the implementation of differentiated instruction in the reading area?

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical evidence of differentiated instruction can be linked to many theories and approaches like learning styles, multiple intelligence theory (MI) and the zone of proximal development. Additionally, national educational documents, like the strategic vision is another theoretical underpinning for DI as it calls for the need to serve a varied student population.

a. Learning styles

An integral part to understanding the need for differentiation in education is through understanding learning styles. 'When teachers understand students learning styles and adjust their teaching to those styles, students learn' (LeFever, 2004). Knowing about learning styles helps teachers reach out to all students in their classrooms and teach them effectively. 'Knowing about learning styles helps you [the teacher] teach all the children, teens, and adults God put in your classroom.' (LeFever, 2004) Students are also likely to succeed if teachers teach them in their preferred *contextual approach to learning*. (Carol Ann Tomlinson, *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*, 2014). Learning styles force teachers to rethink how they do school. Affirming students learning styles and strengths also speeds up the learning process for the students.

Learning styles can also be defined as 'characteristics cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment.' (Sims, 1995). There is an array of implications embedded in this definition that instructors need to grasp. Students respond to a given content in different ways. Identifying how students learn helps provide effective instruction.

Teachers need to incorporate various preference modalities in their daily teaching practices.

Students' demographics have changed recently and the question is how to make up for this increasingly body of diverse student population. Students vary at how they process information because cognitive skills differ from one student to another. Ignoring these individual differences is not an option for an effective instructional system. Awareness of learning styles (visual/auditory/kinesthetic) helps instructors design tailored lessons appropriate for each learner's type and helps in the implementation of effective teaching.

EFL Instructors need to increase their understanding of how learners learn and need to be conscious of individual learning styles to ensure maximum learning success. EFL teachers need to use Neil D. Fleming's learning styles model known as VAK to assess students' modalities /preferences for learning before embarking on the teaching process. Students learn in one of these ways (visual, auditory, kinesthetic). They demonstrate one of these modalities or a mix of all these preferences and strengths during learning anything.

b. Multiple Intelligence theory (MI)

The theoretical foundations of this study are also anchored in the works of Howard Gardener's Multiple Intelligence theory (MI) in which he claims that human beings possess a battery of intelligences and that intelligence is fluid, not fixed, and that teachers should cater for all differences within the same classroom when delivering instruction and assigning assessment. (Tomlinson C. A., 1999). Multiple intelligences show how human beings interact with the world because they represent different preferences for learning or thinking. (Carol Ann Tomlinson, *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*, 2014) Teachers must nurture all types of intelligences within their classrooms and allow for different affinities among their learners.

Teachers' instructional approaches should not seclude the other types of intelligences that students possess. Instead, they should create opportunities for varied learners because they learn in different ways. Intelligence is variable, dynamic and multifaceted. Hence, teachers must strive to nurture all types of intelligences among their learners and align them with the mandated curriculum.

The MI implication for the current study is that teachers must develop all intelligences and create rich experiences for each learner. Howard Gardner (1987) stated that clearly: 'It is of the utmost importance that we recognize and nurture all of the varied human intelligences, and all of the combinations of intelligences.' (Gardner, 2011) The traditional linguistic and logical way of doing school does

not yield any positive impact on students learning outcomes. Hence, the need for differentiated instruction that calls for equity and excellence through building multiple intelligences and nurturing differences among students. He further stated that 'our culture had defined intelligence too narrowly'. Tomlinson's critique states that in order to develop intelligence in schools, educators seem convinced that only narrow, analytical slices of verbal and computational intelligence are important (Tomlinson C. A., 1999). This is the case with our Moroccan schools which focus on drills and the old chalk-and-talk approach. Gardner, however, broadens educators' understanding of intelligence by suggesting the MI theory which redefined the Stanford Binet IQ score and our understanding of intelligence altogether, and put forward the possibility that each learner has somehow a potential intelligence that teachers should nurture. The seven intelligences advocated by Gardner are as follows: Interpersonal (appreciates group work), Intrapersonal (prefers working alone), Kinesthetic (needs movement), Linguistic/Verbal (understanding through speaking), Logical/Mathematical (uses numbers), Musical (Learns through rhythm and music), and Spatial (visual understanding) (Gardner, 2011)

Each learner then demonstrates at least one of these intelligences or a bunch of them together when carrying out a specific task. EFL teachers need to know the strengths of each student through formative assessment in order to plan for students' differences and cater for a variety of learning profiles. The simple tool to assess students multiple intelligences is through simple observation. The way students spend their free time in school can be an indicator of their interests towards a particular intelligence. Teachers can discover their learners' MI in order to prepare assignments at appropriate levels that are aligned with their current proclivities. MI suggests that students learn in different ways and that all of them possess strengths and weaknesses (Gardner 2004). This multi-dimensional nature of intelligence requires teachers to design instruction with student differences in mind. Teachers also need to be flexible and take proactive measures to cater for all types of learners –verbal linguistic, logical, mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical /rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic.

Teachers are required to bear in mind this variable nature of intelligence when designing and planning not only for instruction, but also for assessment; hence, the need for creating an intelligence balance as an optimal goal of differentiated instruction. The essential skills to be taught, like reading, in a given class must be aligned with intelligence preference whenever it's necessary.

c. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Another integral part of the theoretical conception of this work finds its roots in the works of Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* which refers to

"the distance between the actual developmental level as determined

by independent problem solving and the level of potential

development as determined through problem-solving under adult

guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers"

(Vygotsky, 1978)P, 86).

In other words, ZPD is about the intellectual level learners can reach alone on his/her own and the level they can reach with the help of a teacher or adult. Teachers, then, are required to provide instructional input within the range of the learners' capacities and hence allow for differentiation. Teaching is meaningful only if it promotes cognitive challenge. Humans learn best with moderate challenge and through scaffolding and accommodation within their ZPD until a particular skill is mastered. Teachers have to align instruction with the learners' zone of proximal development. Learning can take place if it matches the learner's ZPD and the readiness levels he/she is at during learning a particular knowledge or skill. 'Learning should be matched in some manner with the '[learner's] developmental level. Learning and development are interrelated' (Vygotsky, 1978). In Piaget understanding, if the learner doesn't learn a given concept, it means he/she is not in their development stage. However, for Vygotsky, it means that instruction was outside ZPD. (Orlich, 2001)

In this respect and in accordance with the philosophy of DI, EFL teachers need to deliver instructional input in ways that match the development stage of each learner and this is how students' readiness is catered for. Besides, they should provide learners with tasks a bit beyond their actual developmental level so that they can be challenged.

In the Differentiated Classroom, *Responding To The Needs Of All Learners*, Carol Ann Tomlinson admits that 'Individuals learn best when they are in a context that provides a moderate challenge' (Tomlinson C. A., 1999)(P. 19). DI stems its core tenets from the rudiments of ZPD. Tomlinson refers to the fact that learners need to be challenged in a moderate way, but not to the point of frustration. Teachers are required to build scaffolds once students are within the ZPD and help them boost their learning outcomes to finish whatever task at hand, and

withdraw them once students are able to complete the task alone. Thanks to DI philosophy, many people reached greatness not just in school but outside its walls as well. Therefore, teachers should not limit students by removing their support devices.

d. The Strategic Vision and other official documents that underpin this study.

All current key educational documents in Morocco: the National Literary and Non-formal Education Strategy established in 2004, the Accessibility and Infrastructure Reform in 2005, and the Education Emergency Plan in 2009, the Strategic Vision for the Reform of the Moroccan School set to take place between 2015 and 2030 insist on one message: schools should opt for equity and equal opportunities for all the learners. Students' differences matter and successful teachers need to attend to those differences in a responsive way. The message is even clearer at the Strategic Vision first pillar which emphasizes school fairness and equality of opportunities as a gateway to emancipation and personal and social development. The Strategic Vision as mandated by the National Council for Higher Education recognizes the importance of equity and equal opportunity which must be the top agenda of the Moroccan educational system. This can only happen through providing learners with respectful tasks that take into account their multiple intelligences, not through mandating the one-size-fits-all approach to instruction or through a prescribed curriculum as these exclude many learners from the process of reaching maximum growth.

In full accord with common sense, teachers must not force-fit students into ready-made molds and walk them in lock steps to traverse the same learning roads. (Tomlinson, 1999) . Eventually, there is an urgent need for differentiated instruction that respects students' differences. This is the aim of an effective teaching philosophy that is implicitly embedded in the strategic vision as another reform attempt that emphasizes education as a gateway to social and personal development via equipping our Moroccan students with the soft skills that are likely to meet the pressing demands of the 21st labor market.

V. CASE STUDY

a. Context:

The EFL classroom under investigation is a 2nd BAC, *Arts-stream* (equivalent to 12th grade). It is composed of 28 students (6 males and 22 females). As regards age, the students are between 16 and 20. The majority of these students have been in the same class since middle school, except for two students who just moved from another city.

The school where the research is conducted is an underserved school called *El Mouahidine High school* and it is situated at the heart of scores of underprivileged neighborhoods in Khouribga.

The EFL teacher observed for this research (Mr. Reda Ali, pseudo name) is 40 years old and has been teaching EFL for 17 years. He is knowledgeable of teaching methodology, particularly differentiated instruction. He received online training on the topic and is very keen on finding new ways for reaching all of his students.

Through pertinent classroom observation and daily contact with students, Mr. Reda came to the conclusion that the majority of students in his classroom struggle with the reading skill. The reading materials presented in the adopted textbook, *Ticket to English 2* are either outdated in terms of content (texts and pictures) or written in an unauthentic manner that renders it much more difficult for students to grasp even in their own language, let alone perform the mandatory reading tasks in the English language. Students are supposed to cover a wide range of topics that revolve around 10 study units.

Mr. Reda teaches his students on a daily basis from Monday to Friday with one hour- session devoted to reading per each week. The classroom observation revealed that the majority of students performed below grade level. Some of them experienced frustration and chose to opt out of the reading task any time they were supposed to read. They admit that they 'don't own it', referring to the reading skill. So the reading class has often been a perennial challenge for both the teacher and the students.

It is evident from test and exam grades that Art major students in Moroccan High schools usually struggle with the reading comprehension task. After being interviewed and according to their school history, they admit that they usually leave the reading task till the end of their test or exam period and start answering at random without thoroughly reading the text because they think that they will never understand it. Most students interviewed admitted that they are intimidated by the reading assignment for a reason or another.

The data collected from different resources; students' interviews, school history records, and teachers' insights served as the basis for the introduction of a new philosophy of teaching, differentiated instruction.

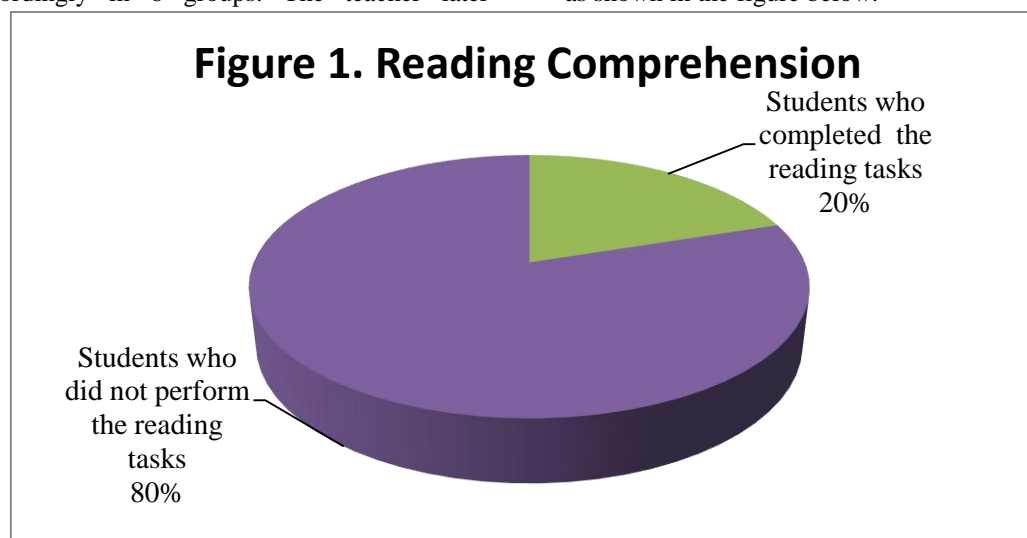
b. Differentiated Instruction for the EFL class

After being stuck in this dilemma, the teacher, who is well grounded in differentiated instruction (He received training on the theory both on-site and online), sought out new venues of instruction to reach out for his students' variance. First, he interviewed students about their likes

and dislikes. He found out that some students like Korean language and are interested in K-pop music. They speak *Amazigh* and are very good at acting. One of the students is already a member of a drama club in town. Some other students are good at singing and playing musical instruments. Students then are identified for differentiated teaching methodology based on the interview results and on the students' interests.

The teacher agreed to use flexible grouping based on students' interests mentioned earlier. Students were grouped accordingly in 6 groups. The teacher later

explained the reading activity which was a total fiasco in the precedent week as it was a traditional reading comprehension class, the sort of one-size-fits-all activity. (All students read one single text and perform certain similar reading tasks like true/false, comprehension questions, reference questions, etc) All students were supposed to read a text about Tommy (see Appendix) and answer related comprehension questions. Only 20 % of students managed to complete the required tasks. 80% waited for correction time to get rid of the reading burden as shown in the figure below.



VI. RESULTS

However, this time, the same reading material was given to students, but they had a plethora of choices to decide how to approach the reading task at hand. The table below illustrates the choices:

Table 1: Students Grouping and Choices

The decision for planning instruction was based on the data collected about students' interests and the failure to finish the first reading assignment. The teacher, Rida Ali, modified instruction to cater for the needs of his students after he noticed that the previous lesson was a total fiasco. The teacher's intervention is grounded in the theory of differentiated instruction

advocated by Tomlinson who is in favour of instructional modification (Tomlinson, 1999). Knowing well about the students, the teacher planned more effectively for

instruction by assigning tasks within students reach. The choices were also aligned with students' interests and happened to be within their zones of proximal development. (Vygotsky, 1978)

At the end of the reading assignment that was based on DI, the teacher interviewed students to get insights about their attitudes after the implementation of the new methodology. 99% believed that the reading comprehension session was so much fun, their needs were met and that they could express their interest while learning reading.

VII. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Giving new learning opportunities and venues for this class proved so efficient.

Learning took place in an anxiety free atmosphere characterized by the ample existence of a plethora of choices and options. Students felt they could connect their

interests and needs with the reading material at hand and they were no longer intimidated by the reading material. Students continued to progress and loved the reading task through the use of DI. Although only product differentiation was performed, students were motivated for the reading lesson. Tomlinson confirmed that the product may be adjusted based on a student's readiness level to learn a skill, their learning profile, and/or their particular interest in a topic (Tomlinson, 1999)

Data collection used triangulation from school history record, to interviews to classroom observation in order to ascertain the cross checking and validity of results.

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Appendix

Reading Comprehension Tommy's story

Drummer Tommy, 15, is studying GCSE Music and loves



composing his own beats. It's a real change from a few years ago, when he had issues controlling his temper and was excluded from school several times. The Drum Works project has given him a creative outlet and helped him stay out of trouble.

Tommy attends The Warren School in East London, where Drum Works has been running fast-paced, high-energy drumming sessions for the past three years. He's been involved in the project since he was 12.

"I was a bit of a troublemaker," says Tommy. "But then I got invited to Drum Works, and it really helped me. It was like all my behaviour got hit into the drums."

I expressed myself on the drums instead of taking my anger out on other people.

Developing as a musician

In the sessions, students drum together in groups of up to 25. The lineup of instruments is similar to a samba band, with each person playing a *surdo*, *repinique* or *caixa* (three different types of Brazilian drum).

Instead of playing a pre-arranged repertoire, the young people get the chance to create their own beats collaboratively, based on the styles of music they enjoy. "You can express your ideas," says Tommy. "You get to make your own stuff, and you can spread it around the room."

Tommy's now a keen drummer outside the sessions too. "I used to play trumpet and trombone, but I got bored of it, and me and my friends started playing the drum kit," he recalls. "But we didn't know anything at all – we literally knew how to hit a drum."

"The Drum Works music leaders are really helpful – if you can't play a beat, they're not gonna judge you for it, they'll teach you till you know how to do it."

"I picked Music for GCSE, and I've been doing compositions on the drums, writing my own beats. Drum Works has helped me get more ideas. In the group I play the snare, so I can adapt from that and turn what we play on separate drums into a beat on the drum kit."

Gaining focus and confidence

The sessions are built into the school timetable, and Tommy's certain that drumming has a positive impact on the rest of his day. "Coming here's like a break," he says. "It wakes you up, you're ready for another lesson."

Susie, a music teacher at the school, recalls the change she saw in Tommy after he found drumming. "His behaviour didn't change overnight, but slowly Tommy's confidence improved as he realised he was good at something."

"His patience and concentration span improved too as he spent the time trying to perfect patterns. He spent his lunchtimes in the music department practising and avoided the conflicts he'd previously been involved with. He

enjoyed coming to school as that's where the drum rooms were.

"He enjoyed making progress and getting better at something. He'd learnt that the only way to improve is to make mistakes and that it's ok to make them."

Teamwork and group performance

The partnership between The Warren School and Drum Works has grown stronger over the course of the project, as more and more teaching staff have observed the sessions' all-round positive impact on students.

There are now 70-80 students from across years 7-11 now regularly involved in the sessions, split across three groups based on their drumming skill levels.

"Although we only have one session a week, you get to know everyone in that session," says Tommy. "You always work together no matter what. I've made good friends with the rest of the group."

The groups have also combined with students from other East London schools where Drum Works sessions take place, and have given end-of-term performances in venues such as the Barbican Centre and the Broadway Theatre in Barking.

"There's about 150 of us in one big group," says Tommy. "Managing to go out and play in front of so many people – I would say that's been my proudest moment. When I first started drumming I had to play in front of the class, and I was so scared, I started sweating! I'm confident with it now though."

If it wasn't for Drum Works, I would have missed out on a lot of things. This is like a once in a lifetime opportunity. Even when I finish school, I can use the skills I've learned."

By : El khdar text retrieved from <https://www.youthmusic.org.uk/tommys-story>